R E P O R T  R E S U M E S

ED 020 981 UD 005 726

NEW SPEECH PATTERNS IN THE FRENCH QUARTER.

BY- BRADDOCK, CLAYTON

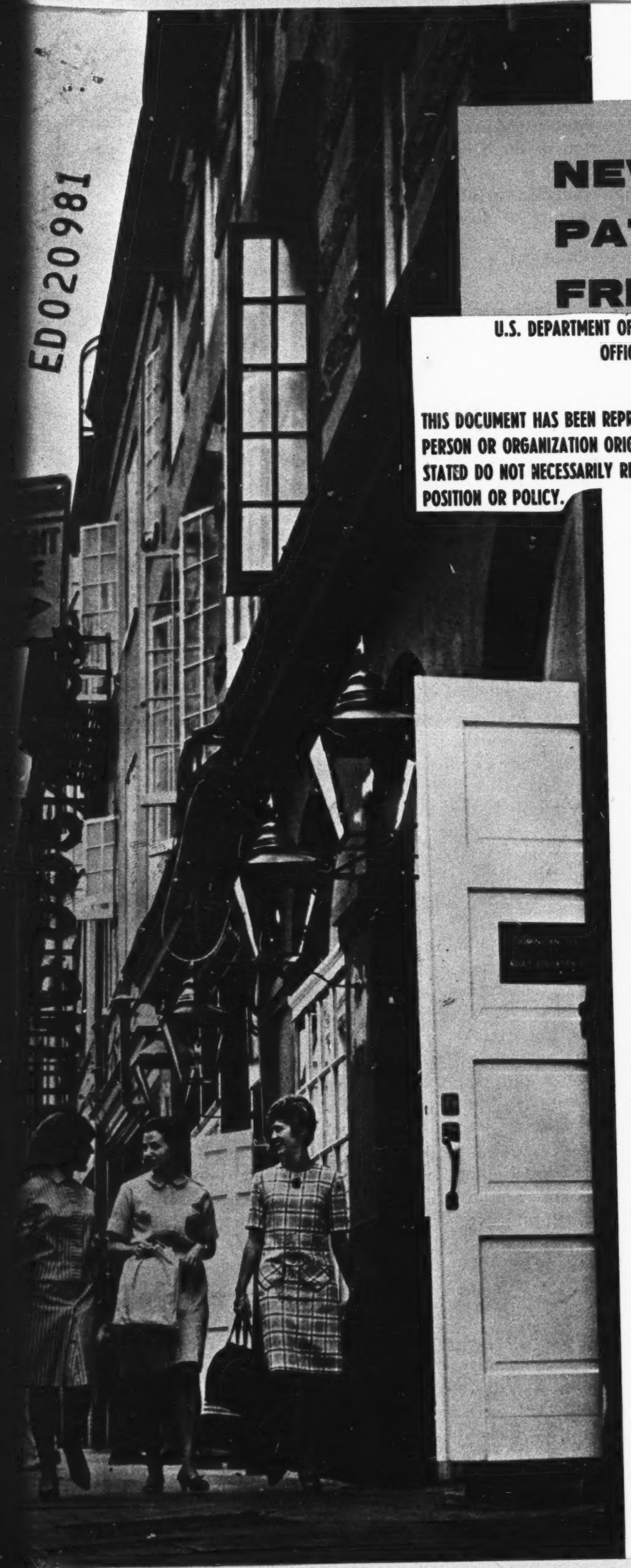
PUB DATE DEC 66

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.25 HC-$0.28 5P.

DESCRIPTORS- *STANDARD SPOKEN USAGE, *SPEECH INSTRUCTION, *CLERICAL WORKERS, EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES, NEGROES, FEMALES, SPEECH HABITS, BASIC SKILLS, OFFICE OCCUPATIONS EDUCATION, SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING, NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA, SAINT MARYS DOMINICAN COLLEGE

BUSINESSMEN IN NEW ORLEANS CITED POOR SPEECH AMONG NEGRO APPLICANTS FOR SECRETARIAL AND STENOGRAPHIC POSITIONS AS THE MAJOR REASON FOR NOT HIRING THEM. AS A RESULT, ST. MARY'S DOMINICAN COLLEGE EMBARKED ON AN 8-MONTH PROGRAM IN 1965 TO TEACH STANDARD SPEECH TO 90 YOUNG WOMEN, 75 OF WHOM WERE NEGRO. STANDARD SPEECH WAS TAUGHT AS A SECOND LANGUAGE. EXTENSIVE USE WAS MADE OF THE LANGUAGE LABORATORY, AND STUDENTS STUDIED SPECIFIC SOUNDS AND WORDS. IN ADDITION, INTENSIVE INSTRUCTION WAS GIVEN IN TYPING, SHORTHAND, ENGLISH, SPELLING, AND PERSONAL GROOMING. IN 1966, THE PROGRAM ADDED COURSES IN READING, MATHEMATICS, AND FAMILY ECONOMICS. THE STUDENTS PAID NO TUITION AND ATTENDED CLASSES EVERYDAY FROM 9 TO 5. ONLY FOUR STUDENTS IN THE FIRST GROUP DROPPED OUT, AND 77 FOUND JOBS SOON AFTER GRADUATION. MOREOVER, MANY OF THE NEGRO WOMEN FOUND JOBS IN PREVIOUSLY ALL-WHITE COMPANIES. THIS ARTICLE WAS PUBLISHED IN "SOUTHERN EDUCATION REPORT," VOLUME 2, NUMBER 5, DECEMBER 1966. (DK)

ED020981



# NEW SPEECH PATTERNS IN THE FRENCH QUARTER

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

By Clayton Braddock

Dawn melts away most of the remnants of the boisterous night-before along a once-notorious alley a block from the Vieux Carre, or French Quarter, in New Orleans. Sometimes the sun uncovers a human derelict trying to blink away the light of another long day of waiting for bars and taverns again to clink and clatter with night life.

Later, after the sun has begun to warm the morning air, a visitor is surprised to see neatly dressed young women walk briskly into the same setting and head toward an entrance into one of a row of seedy buildings jammed tightly along one side of the alley. The pair of sparkling white doors at 112 Exchange Alley (also called Exchange Place) seems out of place, and what lies behind them is vastly different from the hopeless world of the derelict outside. A small black-and-white plastic sign on one door announces undramatically:

**Dominican College**
**Adult Education Project**

Inside is a gleaming modern school for stenographic training, featuring an experimental technique in teaching English as a "second language" to a student body made up mostly of Negroes. The method, along with other phases of a high-quality instructional program, is slowly lowering old barriers which traditionally have blocked the Negro's path to a better life through better jobs in New Orleans' white businesses.

The program is conducted by St. Mary's Dominican College, a Catholic liberal-arts school for women. Using $124,376 in federal funds, the program was started in October, 1965, with 90 women students, 15 of them white. Only four of the students had dropped out by graduation the following May. Within a few weeks after graduation, 77 of the group had been placed in jobs throughout the metropolitan area.

The biggest testimonial to the effectiveness of the new language technique and the quality of the stenographic training is that most of the Negro graduates

---

*Clayton Braddock, a staff writer for* Southern Education Report, *has held newspaper writing jobs in Tennessee, Florida and Alabama.*

05726

were placed in white businesses, an unprecedented step in that city.

Mrs. Alice R. Geoffray, director of the program, is working and hoping for an even better placement score with the second class scheduled to be graduated next spring. Federal grants totaling $167,700 are backing the project's second round.

When the program was conceived by the Rev. Timothy Gibbons, a Dominican priest at the college, since transferred to Kansas, the plan was simply to train Negroes for better jobs. Because of a rapid growth of business and industry in the New Orleans area, the most critical shortage on the labor market was in good secretarial and stenographic help. This determined the kind of program to be offered.

But soon it was apparent that this alone would not be enough.

Norman Francis, the assistant to the president of Xavier University, Catholic Negro institution in the city, was consulted. He quickly advised that secretarial training would not solve the problem, that the speech of many Negroes would be nearly as great a handicap as no employable skill.

"When a person such as Norman Francis, who has the pulse of the Negro community, says that this is something his people need, it is well-founded," said Mrs. Geoffray. "Plus, with [white] business people, you could sense this from the beginning. If you asked why they objected to hiring Negroes, this is the first objection you got. They would not hire them because of their speech."

Poor speech is often an extra burden, even for the qualified Negro job seeker, when carried into the offices of some prospective white employers, said John Duarte, project director of federally backed on-the-job training programs administered by Total Community Action, Inc. He was formerly youth co-ordinator for the Louisiana State Employment Service. "If a businessman is prejudiced, he will look for something to back up that prejudice." Duarte's secretary is a graduate of the Dominican program.

Mrs. Geoffray said company officials tell her that a Negro answering their telephone "would give the business a Negro image and they say that you can always tell a Negro on the phone."

This is debatable in many instances, and the assumption of easily identifiable Negro dialect was proved false when two members of the project's business advisory council listened to tape recordings of students' voices made last year. They identified the voices of two white girls as Negro. In a multicultural area such as New Orleans, identification becomes difficult. The "Channel Irish dialect," characteristic of white residents of one small section of the city, is often mistaken for the so-called Negro speech pattern.

But dialects are a fact, and the English phase of the Dominican College project is aimed at such "nonstandard" speech, mainly at the dialect of Negroes long isolated socially and economically by poverty and racial segregation. The dialect often marks the Negro with a racial stigma that makes it next to impossible for him to use innate ability and acquired skill—if he wants to use them in a white-dominated business world. This, in turn, helps perpetuate and strengthen obstacles in the path of the Negro's trek from the slums. Aside from the racial aspect of the problem, dialect and the just plain poor grammar that usually accompanies it inhibit normal business communications.

Speech and English specialists are quick to say that there is no correct and incorrect way of speaking the language. They say there is only "standard" and "nonstandard" and several shades in between. The 90 students, selected from nearly 500 applicants, cover the entire spectrum when each of their voices is tape-recorded prior to the seven-month class as they read a standard speech test and engage in impromptu speaking. From these and personal contact with each student, project teachers learn which specific sounds and grammar errors must receive the most attention in class.

Not all of the women reveal all of the errors commonly associated with the dialect of the poor, uneducated Negro. Each is required to have a high-school ▶

diploma, and a few have completed some college work. Yet their variations are enough to hinder them in business.

"Oil" becomes "erl," a sound which surprises many Southerners who think it is the exclusive property of Brooklynites in New York. "Respect" becomes "respeck," a habit of dropping the final consonant which shows up in the pronunciation of many words. "Answer" is pronounced nasally as if it were "an-uh-suh." One student reads "ooze" as "oze" because she has never learned the double-O sound. Sometimes "I am" becomes "I be."

Some of the women make very few errors and their speech is far ahead of the other skills which they need to become good stenographic employes. But there are some who present a different problem. Their speech is too precise, their pronunciation exaggerated and their speech rhythm stilted and false. Often these students choose a more elegant word, instead of a simpler word that obviously would have done just as well or better.

Poor speech isn't always confined to those students with less education. Bad habits begun in early childhood are deeply rooted by constant repetition by illiterate or poorly educated parents, other members of the family and by friends. Instead of being eliminated in school, the habits are often reinforced by their Negro teachers, themselves practitioners of the same dialect.

Students in the first Dominican College stenographic training class practice "second language" sounds.

One young woman, mother of a preschool child, came to Mrs. Geoffray's office for an interview as a candidate for the current class. She had attended college two years before dropping out. She was intelligent, knowledgeable, warm in conversation, and eager to be accepted, but her speech revealed that college training had done little for her in that area. Although much of what she said was smooth, it was riddled with gross errors in sound and grammar.

Explaining her difficulty in learning typing in high school, she told Mrs. Geoffray of fingers tangled in confusion trying to hit certain keys ("An' yuh hit wit' yuh thum'); of lack of experience in taking shorthand ("I have never really sit down to have somebody give me dictation"); of trouble in memorizing the typewriter keyboard ("I couldn' stop lookin' at dat book").

"I think the reason that we get them in here with such poor speech patterns," said Mrs. Geoffray, "is that so many of our Negro teachers have had inferior training in their colleges. I think help in establishing good speech patterns is going to have to start when the child is 4 or 5 years old."

Grammar errors are caused by poor training or no training. Sounds which are peculiar to the dialect are often just habitually repeated distortions of the standard sound. "Sounds degenerate this way," said Miss Carolyn Ory, speech teacher in the New Orleans project. But then, she points out, there is a problem which the specialists are aware of but can't easily define—the "rhythm pattern" of the Negro dialect. It is more akin to a lack of rhythm.

"The sound was kept at one pitch. It was dull," said one frank graduate of the first class. "That was the hardest thing I had to pick up—the rise and fall of the voice, the different tones."

Facing all these problems, the Dominican project faculty set out to teach a "second language," using all the paraphernalia of the modern electronic foreign-language laboratory. The term "second language" points up the project's idea of letting the students freely choose another way of talking—a kind of "business speech"—when it will serve better. The introduction to a syllabus used at the school puts it this way:

"The purpose of using speech and language is to be understood. In order to achieve this objective, our speech must be correct or appropriate. 'Correct' in this sense means socially acceptable in the given situation. You would not want to wear a formal gown to a picnic or a pair of culottes or slacks to a dinner party."

"It's a 'choice' situation," said Mrs. Dolly Brien, 24-year-old speech therapist, "rather than saying 'you're going to be correct now.' We say 'you now have a choice and you can control the situation and choose the dialect.' Up to now, most of them have had no facility of choice. For one thing, they are not aware that there is a difference. Even if they are aware of the difference, they don't know how to use the other one [dialect]."

Mrs. Alice Geoffray, project director, interviews one of 500 applicants for the second class.

The task of actually changing the speech of many Negroes would be mountainous, if it were possible at all. Even if it could be done, this would be foreign to the purpose of English-speech work at the project.

"Speech is something very personal," said Mrs. Brien. "When you try to change somebody's speech, you are almost trying to change his personality. We are not trying to eliminate a dialect; we are adding on, giving them some patterns to add to their speech. I don't think we ever mention 'Negro dialect' in class. We never use the word 'change.'"

In the language laboratory, the students learn how to distinguish between standard and nonstandard sounds such as the "oi" sound in "oil" and the distorted "erl" pronunciation often used. Dozens of other sounds, mostly the ones commonly misused, are repeated in single words, then in phrases, then in sentences. In the first class, 12 weeks were spent in analyzing and speaking specific words and sounds. Students are also instructed in the fundamentals of how the tongue, teeth and lips are used to produce certain sounds.

This is all done along with intensive instruction in typing, shorthand, English, spelling and personal grooming. Basic office techniques are worked in with other parts of the curriculum. Added this year are a short course in mathematics, another in wise spending of the family income, an expanded English-grammar program, and another course in reading which will range from the classics to current works.

Yet the result of the project is more than the sum of its courses. Playing a part in the formula are the dedication of a young and eager faculty, the strong backing of Dominican College leaders, advice and help from businessmen, the counsel of leaders in a similar project at Temple University and the driving interest of the students.

"I think the biggest thing this program offers these people," said Mrs. Geoffrey, "is hope, a hope they never had. So many of them see, by getting their education, by improving their speech, that there is a better life for them, that it is not just a dead end."

Mrs. Geoffray feels that the program helped boost confidence in students and meet problems later to confront them in the business world, especially in white firms.

"I don't think they went into the offices with the chip on the shoulder that they came in here with. There was less suspicion and more of a willingness to meet people on an equal basis. The speech course enabled them to take criticism much better than they had in the past. They were not so sensitive when people criticized them. They didn't say 'they are telling me this because I am a Negro.' A Negro businessman who had interviewed some of the students told me he found the students ready and willing to take constructive criticism. He said 'if just for this one fact alone, the program would have been worthwhile.'"

"These girls and the quality of their work have already done a lot to help the race situation in New Orleans," said Duarte. "It will serve as an incentive to others and will show employers that, given the right training, these people can fill some of the vacancies in the labor market. Often the only appeal to which an employer responds is 'what can this person do for me?' You respect a person if he does a good job. And it's pretty difficult to hate a person when you respect him."

The students pay no tuition, but many of them have to live on the meager earnings of part-time jobs at night or on weekends while they attend classes from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. If the ▶

students saw hope, it was through the lens of their bleak status at the time the Dominican project was organized. About 70 per cent of the women were unemployed. The others were working sporadically.

"They could have possibly gotten jobs as domestics," explained Mrs. Geoffray, "but many of them were girls who had two years of college. They didn't want this kind of work so they weren't doing anything. Of those who were employed, very few had ever worked at a job for more than two months at a time."

No further financing is in sight for the Dominican College project after the current class is graduated. If this is the end of the work there, what good is this small scratch in the hide of the colossal problem—180 trained stenographers compared with the vast numbers of unschooled, poor Negroes and whites speaking an unacceptable dialect of their native language? What is the urgency when the improvement of nonstandard speech may be forced to wait on time and another generation or two?

"You have to start somewhere," said Mrs. Geoffray, who has experienced severe poverty and personal tragedy in her own life. "And I think we are taking the first step. If you don't, you will lose all these people [her students] who could be valuable, contributing members of the community. Our students from the first class are now at work earning and putting into the community $25,000 in salaries. They are supporting themselves. They are off welfare rolls. They are creating better homes for their children and giving them more opportunity. If you say wait and start this in the public schools in the next few years, you will miss these people.

"I don't think we can afford to wait." ○

The attractive young woman from Cajun country in Southwest Louisiana smiled and looked sheepish as she admitted her difficulty with a speech trait, a problem that affects the lives of thousands of Americans.

Most people would call her speech trait "incorrect" and others would go so far as to say it is a mark of poor education. But speech experts today say it is just "nonstandard" English, not condemning any speech as right or wrong, good or bad.

"I say 'MY-oh-nez' while most people say 'MAY-oh-naze.' Oh, I say it the standard way most of the time, but when I'm not watching myself, I'll drift back into the old habit," said Miss Carolyn Ory, who comes from a French-speaking family. She is also one of the experts, a speech teacher at St. Mary's Dominican College Adult Education Project in New Orleans. A main effort of the project is aimed at teaching English as a "second language" or "business speech" to 90 stenographic trainees, most of them Negroes, whose speech is "nonstandard."

Her nonstandard pronunciation of the word "mayonnaise" prompts the question: "Just what is standard speech?"

"The dictionaries don't accept 'MY-oh-nez' as an alternate pronounciation with 'MAY-oh-naze' because not enough people are saying it to make it standard." And this puts the focus on what many people, even well-educated citizens, overlook or are totally unaware of. "The dictionary doesn't tell us what to say, but what we DO say," explained Miss Ory, pointing out the most obvious example, that "ain't" is now acceptable and included in the dictionary because it is now commonly used.

While all this may be academic and dealing in trifles, the Dominican College project is just one of several serious efforts to learn more about the mechanics of nonstandard speech, particularly among Negroes, and to advance new teaching techniques for improving it. The need for such programs goes far beyond mere research, because nonstandard speech is usually a barrier to better jobs and a better life.

Some of the other major projects are being conducted at:

- The Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, D. C., where the Urban Language Survey is exposing fallacies about dialects and showing parallels between some nonstandard English dialects and standard expressions in other languages.
- Temple University in Philadelphia, Pa., where research is being conducted and a teaching program has been subcontracted by a Negro business school.
- Howard University in Washington, where Prof. Charles G. Hurst Jr. says the ghetto idiom is acceptable in the slums but tells his students that they must learn "the man's" language if they are to succeed in the middle-class world.

A smaller study is under way at LeMoyne College at Memphis, Tenn., where special instruction is included with the regular English program and students approach standard usage in the same way a standard speaker learns colloquial, formal and other levels of language.